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ABSTRACT

This study traced the evolution of students' attitudes toward their desegregated school over a period of three years. A sample group of ten black and ten white children were interviewed at the beginning, middle and end of the three year period on three topics: (1) their reactions to and feelings about attending their new school; (2) their opinions on the academic life of the school; and (3) their judgments of peer relations within the school. Ratings of the school and its academic program were generally very positive, although they declined significantly over time. Answers to the peer relation question indicated that students perceived both a decrease in positive relations and a decrease in negative relations over time. (Author/EB)

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THE EVOLUTION OF PEER RELATIONS IN A DESEGREGATED MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Twenty randomly selected black and white students were interviewed a) at the beginning of sixth grade when they had just entered a new desegregated middle school, b) at the end of seventh grade and c) just before graduation from eighth grade. Ratings of the school and its academic program were generally very positive, although they declined significantly over time. Interestingly, students perceived both a decrease in positive relations (friendliness, etc.) and a decrease in negative relations (rejection of friendly overtures, etc.) over time. These later findings are interpreted in light of Katz's (1970) argument that ambivalence in racial attitudes may amplify both positive and negative responses.

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The Evolution of Peer Relations
In a Desegregated Middle School

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One major problem with the literature on school desegregation and intergroup relations is that a very large proportion of the research on this topic has been conducted during the first year of the desegregation process (Schofield, 1978; St. John, 1975). Although occasional studies such as Gerard and Miller's (1975) massive longitudinal project span two or more years, studies which span the first three to nine months after the implementation of a desegregation program are much more frequent. The first year of desegregation is often accompanied by a great deal of emotional public controversy which typically dies down over time. Similarly, during the first year of a desegregation program school and community leaders often undertake special efforts to make desegregation work. Often, these efforts are abandoned after the first year or two when the crisis atmosphere abates (Orfield, 1975). Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that new children in a school, regardless of their race, do not immediately become fully integrated into the peer network (St. John & Lewis, 1975; Willie, 1973). Hence, students' reactions to their desegregated schools or to each other during the first year of desegregation are likely to be quite different from their later reactions.

The study reported here traces the evolution of students' attitudes toward their desegregated school over a period of three years. The first interviews were conducted in the fall of 1975, just after these students had entered the sixth grade of a new desegregated middle school from their largely segregated elementary schools. The second set of interviews took place in the spring of 1977, at the end of their seventh grade year. The final interviews were held in June, 1978, just before the students graduated from the school. The interviews covered three topics: students' reactions to and feelings about attending their new school, students'opinions on the academic life of the school, and students' judgements of peer relations within the school.

METHOD

The School

Wexler Middle School (a pseudonym) which serves 1500 students in grades 6 through 8 first opened its doors in the Fall of 1975. The student body, which was 48% black, was obtained through open enrollment of students from a large district in a Northeastern industrial city in which the school is located. A wide variety of special facilities and programs for the school were designed to attract students and to foster a shared pride in the school. Students were selected on a first-come first-serve basis within the predetermined racial quotas. The school's unusual efforts to provide an ideal environment for interracial education which have been documented elsewhere (Schofield, 1977) are illustrated by its staffing pattern. The top four administrative posts are evenly divided between blacks and whites. Similarly each grade has two counselors, one white and one black. About 30% of the faculty are black. Committment to positive intergroup relations is also shown in the school's support of an extensive program of activities specifically designed to help students to get to know one another. For example, twice a week students have special classes whose stated purpose is to help them come to understand themselves and each other.

At the end of the school's first year a decision was made to switch from an open enrollment plan to a "feeder" plan, which would require students graduatting from eleven nearby elementary schools to attend Wexler. The feeder pattern was set so that the enrollment in the school rose from roughly 450 students per grade to about 600 students per grade. Also, the racial composition of the student body changed significantly. By the time the students who entered Wexler when it opened were eighth graders, the school was 70% black.

Subject Selection

The school divided students into classes essentially randomly within quotas designed to insure racial and sexual balance. Participants in this study were randomly selected within racial and sexual quotas from four sixth grade classes which were being observed as part of a study of interaction patterns between black and white students. Twenty children, ten black and ten white, were interviewed for this study. Two children in the initial sample were replaced when their parents refused to let them be interviewed.

Procedures

Interviews were conducted during the school day in private conference rooms. Black students were interviewed by a black female and white students were interviewed by a white female. The interviewers stressed that they were not connected in any way with the school, explaining that they were from a local university.

The questions asked as part of this study are shown in Table 1. Questions 1, 2 and 3 deal with students' reactions to the school. Questions 4 and 5 concern academic life and questions 6 to 12 deal with peer relations. As is apparent from Table 1, questions 9 to 13 were added to the interview schedule in the study's second year. The potentially volatile political situation surrounding the opening of the new school had made it impossible to ask these questions initally.

Questions 1 to 11 were accompanied by a card with a 21 point continuum on it ranging from -10 to +10. The continuum was labeled at five points (-10, -5, 0, +5, +10). The neutral point on these continua was zero with positive numbers indicating a positive reaction to the school and negative numbers indicating a negative reaction. So, for example, the response continuum for the question "How do you feel about coming to Wexler?" was labeled "extremely good" at +10, "pretty good" at +5, "just OK" at 0, "pretty bad" at -5, and "extremely bad" at -10. Questions 12 and 13 were accompanied by continua ranging from "there is no fighting (intimidation)" at 0 to "kids fight (are intimidated) all the time" at +15. The students were instructed to choose the number that best reflected their responses. They were permitted to choose numbers falling between the labeled points if they so desired.

Data Analysis

A 2 x 2 factorial repeated measures analysis of variance was performed on responses to each of the questions shown in Table 1. (Race and sex were fully crossed with 5 individuals in each cell). For brevity's sake, in this summary, the only F's shown are those which reach statistical significance.

RESULTS

Students' initial reactions to Wexler were very positive; however they showed declining enthusiasm for the school as evidenced by the significant decreases of over time in the mean responses to questions 1 to 3.

The responses concerning the academic life at Wexler showed a somewhat similar trend. Teachers were initially rated very high compared to previous teachers but by the end of the third year these ratings had dropped greatly. Both the significant effect of race on responses to question 5 and the interaction of race and time are easily explicable. Blacks entered Wexler with academic skill levels well below those of the generally wealthier white students (Schofield, 1977). Hence, it is not surprising that blacks gencrally felt it was harder to get good grades than whites. In the eighth grade, however, students were divided into two tracks for their academic classes - an 80% white "accelerated" track and an 80% black "regular" track. Thus, in eighth grade most white students completed academically with other accelerated students whereas most blacks were in classes which no longer contained such students.

Mean responses to all three questions (7 - 9) about how well students got along declined significantly over time, indicating, for example, that students thought others were more friendly in earlier than in later years. Interestingly, blacks were more positive in their assessment of peer relations on all three of these questions than were whites.

In interpreting the generally declining mean responses to questions 1 through 8 it is important to keep in mind that students initial judgments were, almost without exception, very positive. For example, only one of the fall 1974 means for black students fell below +5 on the -10 to +10 continua. Thus, even with the statistically significant declines over time on virtually every one of the first 8 questions, 3/4's of the spring 1978 means still fall above the zero "neutral" point.

As shown in Table 1, questions 9 - 13 about negative student relations were asked at two rather than three points in time. The students reported significantly less fear, less teasing and less ignoring or rejection at the end of the third year than at the end of the second. However, the amount of active hostility, as evidenced by such indications as fighting and intimidation, had not changed.

Paradoxically, the trends over time on questions 6 to 8 indicate a worsening of peer relations while those on questions 9 to 13 indicate either no change or an improvement in peer relations. However, the data are contradictory only if one assumes that friendly and unfriendly interracial contact are two poles of a single continuum. Research on intergroup relations has generally assumed such a continuum. However, in recent years both conceptual and empirical work have begun to suggest that this traditional comceptualization needs revision (Patchen, Davidson, Hofmann & Brown, 1977; Sagar, 1977; Schofield, 1978). For example, research by Patchen et al found that self-reports of positive and negative interracial were not related. Further, they found that positive and negative behavior were predicted by quite different sets of variables.

At Wexler, both positive and negative behavior appear to have moderated. A number of plausible explanations are available for this unpredicted finding. None will be discussed in detail here. It should be mentioned, however, that the results fit quite clearly with Katz's (1970) "amplification" hypothesis. Katz has argued that when individuals hold ambivalent racial attitudes, an amplification of both positive and negative responses may result. Hence, to the extent that actual experience with the out-group makes ones attitudes less ambivalent, both positive and negative responses should become less extreme.

TABLE 1 White and Black Students' Reactions to Wexler Middle School and Its Student Body [a]

Item	Fall 1975		Spring 1977		Spring 1978		Effect	F*
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black		
1. How do you feel about coming to Wexler?	4.6	7.8	5.1	6.5	3.0	1.9	Time	8.80
2. If you were going to rate how Wexler compared with your old school, which number would you pick?	6.2	7.0	4.7	6.7	0.4	4.0	Sex Time	5.11 5.10
3. What would you say about how proud students are about being part of the school here compared to your old school?	7.0	5.7	3.3	6.0	1.1	0.5	Time	7.62
4. How do you think the teachers at Wexler compare with the teachers at your old school?	7.0	7.3	4.6	4.6	2.2	1.8	Time	7.58
5. How hard is it to get good grades at Wexler compared to your old school?	3.2	7.0	-1.1	7.0	3.5	3.4	Race Race x Time	7.64 7.76
6. How friendly do you think students at Wexler are compared to your old school?	1.7	6.6	-.6	2.3	-2.4	3.3	Race Time	12.32 3.25
7. How well-behaved to you think students are at Wexler compared to your old school?	1.8	4.5	-3.7	2.1	-4.8	-1.8	Race Time	5.33 10.27
8. How well do students at Wexler get along with each other compared to your old school?	2.4	6.3	1.3	3.9	-1.7	2.5	Race Time	11.78 3.85
9. How often do you think kids feel afraid of the other kids here?			6.5	5.9	1.5	-.8	Time	40.26
10. How often do you think kids here make fun of the way others look or talk?			7.0	7.5	4.8	4.2	Time	8.67
11. How often do kids here ignore or reject someone who is trying to be friends with them?			5.1	4.4	1.0	-5.0	Race Time	12.50 39.36
12. You know I've heard some kids talk about being intimidated by other kids, you know being threatened, scared or pushed around. How much intimidation is there here at Wexler?			9.3	10.2	10.1	7.1	Time x Race x Sex	8.26
13. How much fighting is there here at Wexler?			8.7	8.2	9.0	7.1	Sex	5.01

As indicated on page 2, for questions 1 - 4 and 6 - 8 high numerical values correspond to a positive evaluation of this school. The opposite is true for questions 9 - 13. For question 5, high values indicate that good grades are more difficult to achieve than low values.

* For brevity's sake, in this summary, F's are presented only if the associated were at or below the $p \leq .05$ level.

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